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Empowered for a Better Future: An Analysis of Women's Empowerment Through Gulu Women's Economic Development and Globalization (GWED--G) Organization in Gulu, Uganda

Jessica Wightman
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Empowered for a Better Future: An Analysis of Women's Empowerment Through
Gulu Women's Economic Development and Globalization (GWED-G) Organization in
Gulu, Uganda

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Uganda: Post-Conflict Transformation
Fall 2014

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Dedication

I want to dedicate this paper to all of the women in my life who have shown me how to use my voice and my talents to not only benefit myself, but also to contribute to making our world a better place to live and grow for everyone. I am constantly humbled by the wisdom and vulnerability I have been shown by so many people including mentors, friends, family, and those that I have interacted with indirectly. If not for all of you, I would never have had the courage to dream about pursuing a more equal place for women in our world.

Acknowledgements

I would especially like to acknowledge the women who shared their stories with me and the staff members at GWED-G who are working for justice and were kind enough to make time to assist me in this project. Pamela, Frannie, Jojo, Jeffrey, Venis, and Bosco—your work is incredibly inspiring and I could not have completed this project without each of you. The knowledge I gained from interacting with you will never be forgotten. Thank you for sharing your passion with me.

“The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken.”

-Audre Lorde

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the motivating factors that women in Gulu District, Uganda have for joining empowerment programs, how their perception about their own empowerment has changed over time, and the role one non-governmental organization (NGO) has played in assisting in these women's empowerment. Data was gathered through 12 personal, semi-structured interviews with the assistance of a translator when necessary. Ten of the subjects currently participate in empowerment programs through Gulu Women's Economic Development and Globalization (GWED-G), a local NGO. The two remaining subjects are staff members at GWED-G and served as key informants to this study. The research indicates that women have joined these groups to make social connections and to gain the knowledge provided by the programming. Their self-perceptions have largely changed in a positive way, however, gender based violence (GBV) still plays a role in many of the respondents' lives. In conclusion, the data affirms the notion that rights-based approaches to development and empowerment are the most holistic and most effective in the endeavor for social and economic development for women.

Introduction

Gender expectations have been a prominent part of world development and traditional gender roles have slowed down the development process for women. During conflict and in post-conflict environments, there is a natural opportunity for women to push the boundaries on their gendered confinements due to the mass militarization of men in the community which leaves women to take on non-traditional roles. Once guns have silenced, women seek to maintain their new status but that can often prove to be difficult if communities attempt to cling to pre-conflict traditions. Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) can and have stepped in at this point to assist women in maintaining their newfound status and to continue increasing individual agency.

This study aims to determine the motivating factors that women in Gulu District, Uganda have for joining empowerment programs, how their personal perceptions about empowerment have changed over time, and the role played by in supporting women's empowerment initiatives. Data collected will include women's perception of their own agency as an essential component in the home and their understanding of their human rights as it has changed over time.

Qualitative data will add success stories to the numerical data and will reinforce the understanding that CBO's are a necessary aspect of communities in assisting the task of understanding women's rights to be synonymous to human rights. Empowerment programs and solidarity groups are effective and therefore need to continue.

Background

Gaining a thorough understanding before engaging in research is crucial.

Empowerment of women in a post-conflict setting is a complex issue that has many influencing factors. This section will offer a foundation of knowledge in relation to the gendered constraints to community participation, the history of conflict and gendered experience, the relationships between participation, aid, and conflict, and a working definition of empowerment. Lastly, all of this information will help determine the way my study will contribute to the growing body of knowledge surrounding empowerment.

Gendered Constraints to Community Participation

Gendered differences in community participation have occurred in every part of the world throughout history. In order to understand why women participate in a lesser capacity than men, the expectations and constraints placed on women are important to consider. The International Development Research Centre addresses three factors that contribute to this difference: women's position in the household, women's position in the wider society and economy, and the preferences and individual choice of each woman (International Development Research Centre, 2013). Women's roles fall primarily in the realm of unpaid work related to the home such as child rearing, cooking, and cleaning which leaves little time for profit-raising activities. For women who do participate in both, expectations for duties in the home are not lowered and responsibilities are not shared between men and women to compensate for the added time commitment, which has created the "second shift" phenomenon. The second shift describes the time when a woman returns from work

outside the home and must fulfill all of the duties ascribed to women by traditional roles, often attending to the needs of the husband who has also returned home from work (Alexandrowicz, 2005). Regardless of desire to work outside the home, discriminatory legislation exists all over the world, including developed countries, but is felt more acutely in developing areas (Wiepking & Maas, 2005). Lastly, socialization has affected the choices that women make when they decide to participate or not participate in labor markets. Women are taught from an early age to avoid competition and attention is given placed on community building, loyalty, and self-sacrifice rather than formal productive skill or talents (Chiaburu, Harris, & Smith, 2013). Because of these gender roles, women are poor more often than men (Wiepking & Maas, 2005) and therefore are unable to participate freely in communities.

History of conflict and gendered experience

In conflict situations, women are involved in both seemingly traditional and non-traditional ways. In direct combat, women can be soldiers, servants, 'wives' of male fighters, and even top military commanders. Indirectly, women become heads of household, child producers to aid the armed forces, or advocates for peace (Domingo, Holmes, et. al. 2013). Because men are often the main fighters in conflicts, women's experiences are seen as not directly related, but rather supplementary, and not given much spotlight. As a result, experiences of women in conflicts have unfortunately been meshed into one uniform storyline. It has become obvious that women in post-conflict environments have been increasingly participating in informal sector activities that challenge previous stereotypes of

what makes a woman, however each situation requires its own contextualization in order to add to the general understanding of how women, specifically, are affected by the conflict situation they are in (Sorensen, 1998).

All of these experiences of women are true for the insurgency in Northern Uganda with the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and have been inadequately recorded along with a lack of documentation for the conflict as a whole (Kitara, 2014). Women were abducted and used as combatants, forced wives, and served domestic roles within the LRA while civilian women were raped and murdered (Annan, Blattman, et. al, 2011). Ninety percent of abducted girls and women were forced into marriage (Muwonge, 2007) and were therefore stigmatized upon defection and return to their homes. Upon returning to their homes, both males and females had lost a significant amount of social capital if abducted for extended periods of time. Women, however, were less likely to be educated than men before the conflict and therefore the figures did not change much as the conflict progressed and after it ended (Annan, Blattman, et. al, 2011).

Relationships Between Gender, Aid, and Conflict

Overcoming oppression, regardless of what it is, becomes incredibly difficult when the only group concerned about overcoming it is those who are already oppressed (Freire, 2000). Outside actors or large events often act as an opportunity for priorities to shift and lessen the disparity. If aid is focused correctly, post-conflict situations can open new opportunities for women to participate in the economic and social spheres (Domingo, Holmes, et. al. 2013). Mass mobilization of men into the military, widespread killings of mostly men, and increases in the labor market

assist in breaking down traditional division of labor by gender (U.S. Agency for International Development, 2000). There is a discrepancy between scholars that believe women are often disadvantaged when receiving non-gendered aid in post-conflict situations. Some believe that women are trusted to use aid appropriately over men because of their responsibility to their family and some believe that generic aid does not truly compensate for the experience of women (Puechguirbal, 2012).

Aid organizations attending to women's experiences during conflicts are essential in the transitional justice process; however, this cannot be done without looking at the state of women before the conflict began. Sexual and gender-based violence existed before the conflict and will exist after if the roots of oppression, certain traditional and cultural values, are not addressed (Puechguirbal, 2012). This is not to say that all traditional practices are oppressive, however, many remain to be. This mandates a decision between keeping culture for the sake of maintaining tradition or abandoning tradition in order to liberate the oppressed. No amount of humanitarian or human rights work can force this decision upon a culture; instead it must come from those who belong to the culture. Annan et al. states, "For most females, life at home bore certain resemblances to life with the rebels: withdrawal from school, early marriage, and childbearing" (2011). This oppression has caused women to consistently be labeled as victims and as a vulnerable population regardless of the presence of conflict. While this is true as women are often targeted during war as tools to emasculate their husbands and other male relations through rape or forced marriages, this cannot be where data collection stops.

Conceptualizing women in this way risks keeping the label of ‘victim’ on women even in long-term aid. One of the risks of labeling women as perpetual victims is that stereotypes are reinforced and welfare-oriented projects persist that aim to reduce suffering here and now. Short-term projects, however, do not always support women’s own long-term strategic interests (Sorensen, 1998).

It is important to note that while gender equality will help bring economic growth, economic growth will not necessarily bring gender equality. Advancing gender equality requires strengthening different dimensions of women’s autonomy: economic and political autonomy, full citizenship and freedom from all forms of violence, and sexual and reproductive autonomy (Bradshaw, 2013). In the immediate aftermath of conflicts where an air of emergency still persist, Angela Ravens-Robert believes that

“There is ‘no time’ to do gender work, as what is needed is rapid action, life saving food, and material distribution. Performing nuanced analysis and targeting change is too cumbersome, complex, and time consuming, indeed downright harmful to the ‘real work’ of saving lives” (Puechguirbal, 2012).

This may be correct in an emergency context, however, the work of rebuilding communities once the guns have gone silent must include gendered nuance in order for the whole community to heal and contribute adequately once again.

Definition of empowerment

Empowerment is a notion that can have hundreds of meanings to different people. There is no standard formula that will work equally well in every context it is applied to bring about empowerment for any specific person or group of people. It

encompasses agency, social relations and influence, status, cultural norms, and opportunities for advancement (Wu, 2013). Because empowerment is such a vast concept, a working definition is required. When referencing empowerment, this study will employ this definition: a feeling of positive self-worth that accompanies the ability a person has to earn an income and significantly participate in the betterment of herself and her family through means of her choosing.

Contribution to current body of knowledge

The idea of women's rights as universal rights is still in the process of being accepted while violence against women remains prevalent and women still do not have full and equal participation in economic and political life (Bradshaw, 2013). Integrating women into development should, therefore, remain a priority on a world scale. Pathways of Women's Empowerment found in their report, *Empowerment: A Journey Not a Destination*, that "...what is empowering to one woman is not necessarily empowering to another, therefore, understanding empowerment must come from a woman's own experience, rather than focus on a predictable set of outcomes" (2012). My study is a result of this finding. My research will seek to contribute personal stories of the way working with local initiatives has helped women change their perception of their own empowerment status. In order for empowerment to become an option for every woman, the positive experiences of empowerment that are already occurring need to be highlighted to the women who have not yet been empowered and for them to see that there is hope for change. Women's rights are human rights and until those terms have synonymous meanings, hearing the stories of women's empowerment journeys will still be

important to prove that the local initiatives are creating positive outcomes. One author rightfully claims, “without ethnographic information, we can neither fully comprehend the meaning of women’s post-war rebuilding activities, nor assess their potential value and impact” (Sorensen, 1998).

Statement of Objectives

- Discover the reasons women join solidarity groups
- Examine the role of one community based organization in assisting to empower women
- Determine the way women's perceptions of their personal empowerment have changed since joining the group

Justification

Importance to the Community

For those who believe in the equality of women, stories of success need to be highlighted and widely shared in order to prove that CBOs are working. This will ideally help fuel the passion people feel to continue to do the work of justice.

However, in all societies, not everyone has come to understand how the oppression and subordination of women negatively impacts everyone. Therefore, sharing these stories can begin to change the hearts of those who maintain a skewed understanding of the importance of women and their participation in society.

Not every story will be a success and failures are just as, if not more, important to share with the community. These stories are often filled with violence and oppression, which negatively impacts the entire community by continuing the subordination of women and condoning hegemonic masculinity. Highlighting vulnerability and failure will offer a contrast to the successes and allow the community to see the work left to be done. Unfortunately, our world comes to understand the need for justice through suffering and people often do not understand how institutions or societies can be harmful until those who have been harmed are given the space to give voice to their experience. Empowerment cannot be achieved in a uniform manner; instead it must be gained by an individual and is specific to her own situation. Therefore listening to each woman's story will allow a community built on mutual respect for the individual and will offer safe spaces for everyone to share their personal experiences, both positive and negative.

Importance to Scholarship as a Whole

The experience of men is still widely considered as normative in a world where it is essential to understand the plight of women in order to begin to dismantle systems of inequality. Although gender-neutral pronouns are used and scholars realize the difference that gender creates in the human experience, there is still a skewed perception of women's experiences as secondary and men's as normative (Hegarty & Buechel, 2006). Adding data to a collection of knowledge with women as the center will minimize the affects of androcentrism.

Furthermore, scholars widely agree that women are more affected by violent conflicts (Kuwali, 2012) (Zuckerman & Greenberg, 2004)(U.S. Agency for International Development, 2000), however, Marcia E. Greenberg and Elaine Zuckerman have found that few post-conflict reconstruction programs specifically focus on issues of gender differences and discrimination (2006). "International relations continue to make women's experiences of war invisible because it is not deemed relevant to the debate around peace and security issues" (Puechguirbal, 2012). Because men are typically more closely associated with the physical fighting, the primary role of violence, women's experiences as rape victims, combatants, and bystanders is relegated to the second thought. A holistic approach to peace-building and reconstructing society in post-conflict environments would consider the way women are affected in ways that men are not.

Personal Interest

I chose this topic in order to hear the story that is often unheard. Building a better world includes taking every individual's experience into account and looking beyond the cultural standard for whose opinion is considered. As a woman, I have

both seen and experienced the ways in which women are excluded from participating in society and, as a woman with privilege, I see it as my responsibility to share the stories of those who may not be able to speak for themselves. Creating a network of solidarity by the oppressed will only assist in dismantling the oppressive systems. The differences in nationality, culture, socioeconomic status, education, and countless others still exist but the shared category of 'woman' binds me to these people in ways that I cannot fully understand and reminds me of my obligation to my fellow humans.

Methods

Overview

Through this study, I conducted 12 interviews. Five through GWED-G's NUWYLEI program in Lamogi and five from the Lokokwo Peyot Women's Group in Paidwe Parish, Bobi sub-county at the homes of the respondents and two with staff members of GWED-G at the GWED-G office in Gulu. The women from Lamogi have been participating in the VSLA program sponsored by CARE and GWED-G for at least two years while the women from Bobi have been participating in their group for over five years. Participation on the part of those being interviewed was completely voluntary and there was no compensation involved. By signing a consent statement, each person was aware that she was able to end the interview at any time. Each interview in the field lasted no longer than 30 minutes and key informant interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour. Semi-structured interviews were the most logical option due to the variety of respondents' experience. These interviews allowed me to collect information regarding the situations that brought women to join the two groups and the way their perspectives and priorities have changed throughout their experience within their group.

Effectiveness

I feel that this method was mostly effective due to the time restrictions and means for conducting research in an unfamiliar setting. I would not have been able to procure interviews with these women had I not had a connection with the two programs through GWED-G. Ideally I would have been able to conduct a larger quantity of interviews but with transportation, translation, and staff availability all

factoring together made going to the field difficult. I would have been gathering data up to a week before the end of the research period and therefore would not have had adequate time to analyze the information. After conducting 10 interviews, I decided to stop there so that I could spend a significant amount of time focused on analyzing the data collected.

Usefulness of Method

Conducting interviews was incredibly useful as I was seeking to gain information related to personal experience. Although there was an air of formality, interviews are more conversational and therefore offered a more casual setting than using a survey, a focus group discussion, or group interviews. The main way this method could have been improved would be to conduct fewer interviews each day and to visit the field more often so that I could analyze the data in smaller pieces and be able to adapt my interview outline if necessary. I found it difficult to alter my questions to be relevant for the next interview when I only had a few minutes in between. I do recognize, however, that the respondents have many responsibilities and therefore mobilizing people to meet on various days is not always feasible.

Issues with Method

To conduct my interviews, I asked the questions in English and a member of the GWED-G staff would act as a translator for the women. When briefing the translator about my study, I made sure to request that they translate the exact response, however, a few different instances made me question whether they were actually adding their own information. I cannot be sure and therefore did not strike any of the information from my records. Ideally, I would have a translator that I

know better than simply meeting right before leaving to go to the field but the time restrictions did not allow for that to happen. Having a translator from within GWED-G, especially someone who has worked with the respondents, proved to be very helpful because it was obvious that the women were comfortable with their presence. This could be an issue if the groups were not as effective as they have been due to respondents being uncomfortable sharing information.

A few different occasions, I noticed a change in demeanor of the NUWYLEI respondents after asking certain follow-up questions. These instances occurred most often when the respondent would allude to domestic violence as a result of her participation in the VSLA. Because I only interviewed these women and was not able to spend time with them to build rapport, I was unable to break down cultural barriers to gain real trust and develop a relationship in which they would feel comfortable divulging sensitive information. To overcome this in the future, a female translator may be more effective to create a space of all women.

Another issue that I experienced was a sporadic opportunity for visits to the field to actually conduct interviews. Both programs I interviewed through are very established and therefore most of the responsibility has been left to community-based facilitators, leaders within the village who take on the responsibility to ensure success of the programs. This meant that when I went to the field only twice and I conducted half of my interviews in the span of three hours each time. This left little opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of my questions, the order they were in, or what information I was not obtaining. Having the opportunity to pilot my

interview questions with one or two respondents first would have been beneficial to be able to see where my questions could have been improved.

Lessons Learned

Ideally it would be better to conduct interviews without a translator however given the circumstances it was necessary. I learned to be more thorough in explaining my expectations to my translators and making sure that they understand before the interview rather than realizing in the middle of it that my directions were not received well.

Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed me to think in the moment during interviews to be able to dig deeper and ask questions that were more pertinent to some respondents than to others. Using a recording device made this easier as I was able to focus on what was being said and on formulating new questions rather than focus on taking detailed notes. Each respondent has a different story to share and the flexibility in semi-structured interviews allowed me to keep a relatively consistent question outline where I was always generating similar data but still allowed me to deviate from my plan and dig deeper if needed.

Ethics

Women are labeled a vulnerable population by the Ugandan government, which is what inspired my desire to conduct this study and to highlight the stories of women. However, researching within vulnerable communities comes with necessary caution extending beyond the one quality that qualifies them as vulnerable. In compiling my data, maintaining the confidentiality of my respondents and making certain they were aware of how I would do that was of the utmost importance. This ensured that they could feel free to answer truthfully and critically when necessary. Before conducting any interview, each person signed a consent statement that outlined where my study would be distributed and to whom, the purpose of my study, and the possible outcomes. They were asked for permission to record the interviews. The recordings were transcribed and the audio files deleted to maintain confidentiality. After conducting each interview, the respondent's real name was struck from my records and immediately given a pseudonym. The only place their names occur is on the consent statement that they signed which I will keep for a period of six months after the completion of my project and will then shred.

Certain questions that I asked often generated sensitive answers and it was evident in the way respondents answered that I had touched on deeper issues, specifically related to issues of Gender Based Violence. Sensitivity became incredibly important in these instances as I could tell through trial and error that being direct led me respondents to answering vaguely and visibly disengaging from the interview for several questions. I did not want to force these women to relive

traumatic experiences but I knew that I needed a way for them to feel safe to tell me the truth. Therefore, I reworded each interview question for situations where I could tell respondents were becoming uncomfortable.

Findings

Analyze the reasons women join solidarity groups

There were many common themes that women shared as to why they joined their group. The opportunity to socialize with others in a safe environment, something to do, the opportunity to learn about their rights, and a place to learn new things were all reasons given by respondents. Before joining groups, seven of the ten women spoke of feeling lonely and isolated. Nancy's driving force to join the group resulted in her understanding that "we cannot be an island as humans, there is goodness in groups" (personal communication, November 6, 2014). For the VSLA participants, having access to an emergency fund was critical in their decision to join because it helped them ensure that they would be able to afford their children's school fees if they were unable to generate enough money on their own. Four of the ten women specifically mentioned not joining the group immediately, but upon seeing how other women in her community were benefitting, decided to join. The most incredible moment throughout the interviews was when Harma signed the consent statement, smiled at the interviewer, and told the translator that she would not have been able to sign the form had she not joined the group. She joined because she wanted to learn to write and the group taught her.

Skills' training was a big factor for women to join. When asked how her life looked different since joining, Mercy shared "I used to go and ask others if I could work in their field for money but now others come to my garden and ask me because they know I am well-off and know how to save" (personal communication, November 6, 2014). Women were drawn to joining to be able to gain more nuanced

knowledge of farming skills and ideal times to plant different seeds. The VSLA group also offered women an environment where they could learn how to save money and budget properly in a supportive community with mutual accountability. Each group also offers leadership training and requires that group members fill those roles.

Rights awareness training was the most noted benefit to joining the groups. All of the women saw the classes focused on women's rights, SGBV, and domestic violence reporting methods as the most beneficial aspect of the group to better their home environment. Faith cited these trainings as a source of peace for her family, "they have given me a voice and a way to speak to my husband. I can now refuse him. We work as a team" (personal communication, November 6, 2014). The communication skills gained allowed women to form new relationships with stakeholders in their community such as schools and health facilities which in turn allowed them to voice their opinions and make positive changes in the community. One woman spoke frankly about the benefit that this specific training afforded her declaring that, "to keep quiet about my rights would have led to suicide" (Lily, personal communication, November 14, 2014). This exemplifies how crucial it is for women to know their rights and to be able to speak out about and demand just treatment for themselves and their children. One woman laughed and stated, "I had no choice but to join once I found out they were teaching about rights. It was the most reasonable choice!" (Abigail, personal communication, November 14, 2014).

Women see the benefits of joining these groups. They are real and they truly affect women's lives for the better. Each respondent felt a strong responsibility to care for her family and joining the group allowed them a space to not only seek

support, but also to gain skills and knowledge that will ultimately benefit her children and husband and their individual and collective futures. The financial and emotional security these groups offer are not found in other places in communities (Kevin, personal communication, November 14, 2014), which was a main pull factor for many women to join.

Violence persists in society and women will continue to suffer without solidarity groups. They are not the only beneficial means of intervention but they are effective nonetheless. When women feel that they are consistently unable to provide for their children, unable to write, and contemplate suicide before being exposed to groups, intervention is necessary. When understanding the reasons women are drawn to these groups, it will help those facilitating the groups more accurately tailor the motives of the group to better meet the needs of the members. When oppressed as many of these women are, solidarity groups need to focus on being efficient in order to be able to draw as many women in as possible and therefore understanding their needs and time constraints is imperative to success.

Giving women a space to learn will help them reduce how often they face instances of SGBV. When rights are understood, inequality statistically decreases regardless of the oppressive factor (Domingo, Holmes, et. al. 2013). These Acholi women are all between the ages of 20 and 35, which means that they spent a significant part of their childhood growing up in the internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. The safe spaces that these groups provide begins to compensate for the part of their lives where education was unstructured and ineffective (Gracious, personal communication, November 14, 2014).

Examine the role of one community based organization in assisting to empower women

Community initiatives are increasing in popularity to overcome issues involving human rights violations, especially in post-conflict environments (Kitara, 2014). In many cases, this begins by empowering local women to succeed, to be educated, and to develop a voice in their respective communities. GWED-G is an organization in Gulu, Uganda that tackles community issues from a rights based perspective instead of a humanitarian perspective. “[It is responding] to the human rights violations that have occurred in this environment for the last 25 years. [It is] trying to make sure that the culture of recognition of respect for human rights and life and dignity for all is strengthened” (Pamela, personal communication, November 17, 2014). A rights based approach dictates the way injustice and inequality is viewed in community. This perspective means that communities are not simply given a borehole or a health center, but they are told that as humans we all have a right to these things and then assisted in demanding for their rights to be met (Frannie, personal communication, November 17, 2014). A rights based approach also means that everyone in the community must be involved because one person’s rights being violated in turn affects the whole community. This includes mobilizing all members of the community including men, women, and youth regardless of the type of outreach being performed.

GWED-G specifically aims to provide holistic services surrounding five thematic areas: women’s rights, peace building, economic empowerment, health with an emphasis in women’s health, and advocacy. When asked if separate programs are offered in each area, Pamela, the executive director of GWED-G, smiled

saying, “each area is separately funded but the beauty is that they have synergy which creates linkages” (Pamela, personal communication, November 17, 2014). This means that male engaged programs that promote women’s rights through training male role models and advocacy. “Women cannot succeed without men acknowledging their rights” (Frannie, personal communication, November 17, 2014). Therefore, many programs exist in one village. Communities are assessed for potential success and when GWED-G enters an area they aim to stay there. The executive director declared:

“We are deepening our support to groups, we are not interested in doing too much with very many groups. The groups we have are benefitting from us more than once. They benefit and they remain very strong, empowered groups of people” (Pamela, personal communication, November 17, 2014).

GWED-G has determined that its role is to support a fewer number of communities for longer periods of time in the hopes that neighboring communities will see the success and engage the beneficiaries in dialogue to be able to learn about their rights.

Community networks take the work GWED-G does in the community to the local, most grassroots level. People who have an existing tie to the area reach out to the village, and then community action teams (CAT) are formed consisting of locals who wish to serve in a role for programming. These people are trained through capacity building and curriculum classes that will help people execute their duties. These networks are responsible for being able to support their own community; therefore a needs assessment is performed to discover the existing gaps. These gaps are reflected in the capacity training offered to specific people. The beauty of these trainings is that the local leaders gain the opportunity to be trained in something

they want to be trained in. Instead of forcing a role on a person, he or she chooses the type of training they receive. “If somebody wants to be a community counselor, we give them counseling skills” (Pamela, personal communication, November 17, 2014). These networks are often adequate intervention for the different issues that arise in communities. Pamela stated, “Just because someone goes to these networks does not mean the problem always comes to [GWED-G]” (personal communication, November 17, 2014). This shows that GWED-G is training people not only to overcome issues in their own community, but that the community is not solely reliant on the organization for support. If, for some unfortunate reason, GWED-G were to close tomorrow, the communities will not lose all of the information they have received, instead they will be able to continue growing as a result of the effectiveness of the trainings they have already completed.

GWED-G’s role in the community is to ensure that all people, not only women, are aware of their rights as human beings and that they have the knowledge necessary to demand for their rights to be respected. Empowerment is a holistic concept that must address all areas of life where rights are being violated. Both staff respondents see this as essential to actively participating in the economy of a developing country. Pamela believes that “It all goes hand in hand. Empowerment without livelihood leaves big gaps. Addressing the rights of people will ensure their contribution to their family which enables them to contribute to society” (personal communication, November 17, 2014). In post-conflict situations, there is the ability to reshape communities that have previously been oppressive to become more inclusive and welcoming for all members (Domingo, Holmes, et. al. 2013). Local

initiatives are more effective than outside organizations because of cultural barriers including tradition, language, and practices.

In post-conflict situations, there is oftentimes a keen sense of and desire to practice traditional culture (Pamela, personal communication, November 17, 2014). When asked where GWED-G meets resistance, Pamela referenced the patriarchal community with an increase in dominant masculinity due to times of war. This has made GWED-G's work of recruiting male role-models and offering programming around SGBV specifically tailored to men just as important as programming suited for women. The involvement of men in women's empowerment programs through GWED-G Engaging Men Initiative has resulted in a new role for men in the community as allies, partners, role models and change agents. Engaging traditional and cultural leaders, who are the custodians of social norms and customs, and spouses of empowerment group participants has also identified men as clients for much needed psychosocial support. These are all positive trends leading towards the full accomplishment of gender equality through empowerment of women in terms of engagement with the economic, social and political sphere for women and this momentum needs to continue.

Determine the way women's perceptions of their personal empowerment have changed since joining the group

There was a remarkable change noted by all ten respondents in the way each woman described her situation after joining the group. Before, common ways to describe their lives were words such as "difficult," "fearful," and "lonely" and phrases like "no point to life," "I feared people," and "many worries." Responses when asked about their life before joining were very brief. When asked about how

their lives have changed, women's faces lit up with a smile and they went on and on about the benefits, a few women sharing stories for as long as three minutes about how the group changed their lives. The main differences they noted were in their feelings about themselves, feeling empowered through the skills they learned, and a changed understanding of empowerment.

All ten answered with a very frank, "no" when asked if she felt empowered before joining the group. All of the respondents overwhelmingly described a better self-image after participating in the rights awareness and SGBV trainings. For those whose husband's also were members of a group, four out of six described improvement in their communication and the ability to make decisions together as a couple and one specifically stated that she felt that she now had the ability to disagree with her husband if she chose to. Only one woman specifically stated that her husband did not approve of her belonging to the group however he allowed it due to the income it generated for their family. Two respondents mentioned feeling her husband's support made her feel that she was doing the best thing she could as a woman for her family and that gave her confidence. The most noted change from all respondents was the ability to find the courage to voice her thoughts and opinions as a result of participating in the group. Women called themselves "community leaders," "a point of reference," and "facilitators of others' rights." Carol felt confident that she could lead the community in any way that was needed after participating in the group (Kevin, personal communication, November 14, 2014). Overall, it was obvious that the groups positively changed the language women use to speak about themselves and their contribution to their families.

Being able to provide for their families was noted by seven of the ten respondents. There was an air of helplessness when interviewees would mention an inability to pay for her child's school fees or to only be able to feed them one meal a day. Many women cited the benefits that came from the VSLA training as helping her feel empowered. "Being able to save and know that at the end of the day, I will have 10,000 shillings instead of spending that each day and not knowing how to save. That changed me and allowed my children better opportunity" (Mercy, personal communication, November 6, 2014). Other women mentioned the new type of work she was doing as a result of learning new skills contributed to feeling empowered. Instead of only growing vegetables to feed their own families, two women specifically stated that the group had given them the skills and knowledge to start their own small business selling produce at the local market which allowed them to make more money. One said, "others look up to me now because I have a face in the community. My produce benefits others, and the money I earn benefits my children. I feel good about my work" (Lily, personal communication, November 14, 2014).

When asked what an un-empowered woman is like, three of the six women asked this question responded by saying themselves before joining the group. One woman said, "I could not have even told you what being empowered meant because I had no idea" (Harma, personal communication, November 14, 2014). The following are a few of the answers given by respondents when asked to define their idea of empowerment:

- "Being empowered is a situation where one can and has the ability to do something good" (Kevin, personal communication, November 14, 2014).

- “Being empowered gives you the will power to overcome bad times and to do things to boost yourself and your family” (Lily, personal communication, November 14, 2014).
- “If you are happy, you will feel empowered. You can do anything. Anger demobilizes you. Happiness mobilizes” (Harma, personal communication, November 14, 2014).
- “Being empowered leads to happiness. Happiness gives you power and you can work to sustain yourself” (Abigail, personal communication, November 14, 2014).

These show that empowerment does not come in a specific formula. These respondents mention happiness and ability as things necessary to feel empowered but those two things are not synonymous for each woman. The important thing about empowerment is that each person, whether a women, man, or child, needs to define for themselves what it means to be empowered and to have the resources necessary to make those things a reality.

In a patriarchal society that widely projects notions of dominant masculinity, it is imperative to seek out the experience of women, especially empowered women, in order to break down barriers of injustice. As a result of the conflict, many women gained access to groups that assist them in doing just that. Conflict has a way of negatively affecting a person’s self-worth, which makes it even more difficult to an already marginalized group of people to overcome oppression.

Conclusion

This study has collected data surrounding women's empowerment in the post-conflict environment in Gulu, Uganda through the assistance of one CBO based on three objectives: (1) analyze the reasons women join solidarity groups, (2) examine the role of one CBO in assisting to empower women, (3) determine the way women's perceptions of their personal empowerment status have changed since joining the group. Overall, these groups have proven to be successful in helping women feel empowered to voice their opinions, demand for services, and to have the ability to provide for their families.

Being able to provide for her family was the most noted reason as to why women join groups. The responsibility that each woman felt to be able to pay her children's school fees and to be able to feed them multiple meals a day was apparent in every interview. Beyond this, women also experienced a community that would support them, whether financially or emotionally, at any time, which was apparent to them before joining. This has bonded communities together in many ways because their success is no longer independent of another's. In the case of the VSLA group, respondents felt a stronger tie to their community than before because of the emergency fund. If a group member's child got sick, it was a concern to all members because the emergency fund would be used. Lastly, the rights' training members received was an immense draw factor for the groups. Understanding their rights and learning how to report cases of SGBV, two things women largely did understand or did not believe they could do before joining the group, proved to be the most important knowledge received.

GWED-G's role in the community has been to share knowledge about individual human rights, specifically women's rights to areas that would otherwise remain unaware. This is done through different types of solidarity groups that are initiated through grassroots community organizers who have received training. They seek to holistically empower a smaller number of communities rather than attempting to tackle the region as a whole. The training and livelihood support offered by GWED-G and other actors has increased women's skills and confidence all the while women are becoming more prominent in decision-making at the household level. GWED-G's pioneering work in financial including through VSLA has enabled over 1,000 women to emerge as critical economic actors and taking advantage of economic opportunities to secure their family's livelihood, security, and advancement. In addition to economic empowerment, these groups are important entry points for peace building, psychosocial support, building social capital and networks for activism, building self-esteem, and leadership skills. There is evidence of increased mobility and influence in different forms at the community level, with women actively participating in solidarity groups and VSLA.

Empowerment has come to mean something very important to the respondents in this study. Participating in their respective group has shown them what it means to be empowered and also given them the knowledge and skills necessary to live lives of empowerment. Empowerment, ultimately, was linked to women finding her own voice to not feel confident to demand for services, safety, and opportunities for herself and her family. Many women are now looked upon as role models of empowerment in their community and others seek their advice.

There is no doubt that these groups have helped women become empowered in their community. Through personal testimony and an analysis of the stark differences in lifestyle before and after joining, these women now feel that they have a voice and a responsibility to speak up for themselves, their families, and their communities. Because only one organization was analyzed in this study, it cannot be stated that GWED-G is doing the best job to empower women, but it can be declared that the work they are doing has been incredibly beneficial thus far.

Glossary

CAT - Community action team

CBO - Community based organization

GBV - Gender based violence

GWED-G - Gulu Women's Economic Development and Globalization

IDP - Internally Displaced Person

LRA - Lord's Resistance Army

NGO - Non-governmental organization

NUWYLEI - Northern Uganda War-affected Youth Livelihood Empowerment Initiative

RAT- Rapid action team

SGBV - Sexual and gender based violence

VSLA - Village Savings & Loan Association

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